Claims

1.   A method for distributing a dialing function of a call center among a plurality of networked personal computers connected to a public switched telephone network (PSTN) through a gateway, the method comprising:

within each personal computer:

retrieving a different set of telephone numbers from a contact source;

simultaneously dialing at least a subset of the telephone numbers using the gateway;

establishing a voice connection with a first contacted party in response to the gateway indicating that the first contacted party has answered;

receiving an indication from the gateway that a second contacted party has answered while the voice connection with the first contacted party is still active;

automatically selecting one of the networked personal computers that does not currently have an active voice connection; and

signaling the selected personal computer to establish a voice connection with the second contacted party.

2.   The method of claim 1, further comprising suspending the dialing of additional telephone numbers for a personal computer with an active voice connection.

3.   The method of claim 1, wherein establishing a voice connection comprises:

16

notifying a call center agent using the personal computer that the call has been

answered by the first contacted party; and

immediately playing to the first contacted party a greeting previously recorded by

the call center agent to compensate for any delay by the call center agent

in responding to the first contacted party's answer.

4.   The method of claim 3, wherein notifying further comprises providing the call

center agent with details about the first contacted party during playback of the

prerecorded greeting.

5.   The method of claim 4, wherein the details are selected from the group

consisting of city of residence, state of residence, local time, and information about

previous attempts to reach the first contacted party.

6.   The method of claim 3, wherein establishing further comprises simultaneously

playing the prerecorded greeting to the call center agent to allow the call center agent to

make a seamless transition to speaking with the first contacted party.

7.   The method of claim 1, wherein the contact source comprises a common

database for all of the personal computers in the call center, and wherein the database

includes a field to indicate whether a particular telephone number has been previously

retrieved by a different personal computer to prevent duplicate retrievals.

8.   The method of claim 7, further comprising scrubbing the contact database for telephone numbers on a do-not-call list, duplicate telephone numbers, and telephone numbers with invalid area codes.

9.   The method of claim 1, wherein the contact source comprises an affiliated website, the method further comprising receiving a real-time request from the affiliated website comprising the first contacted party's telephone number.

10.   The method of claim 1, further comprising monitoring a voice connection status of each networked personal computer in the call center.

11.   A method for deploying a call center using a plurality of inexpensive personal computers, the method comprising:

coupling the plurality of personal computers to a public switched telephone network (PSTN) through a gateway;

networking the plurality of personal computers to permit each personal computer to monitor a voice connection status of the other personal computers in the call center;

connecting the plurality of personal computers to a contact source such that each personal computer may retrieve a different set of telephone numbers to dial;

installing an auto-dialer on each of the personal computers for simultaneously

dialing at least a subset of the retrieved set of telephone numbers for the

personal computer using the gateway;

furnishing each personal computer with communication software to establish a

voice connection with a first contacted party in response to the gateway

indicating that the first contacted party has answered;

providing each personal computer with routing software to automatically transfer

a call to a second party answered while the voice connection with the first

contacted party is still active to one of the other personal computers that

does not currently have an active voice connection.

12.   The method of claim 11, further comprising configuring the auto-dialer of each

personal computer to suspend the dialing of additional telephone numbers while the

voice connection with the first contacted party remains active.

13.   The method of claim 11, further comprising adapting the communication software

to immediately play to the first contacted party a greeting previously recorded by the call

center agent to compensate for any delay by the call center agent in responding to the

first contacted party's answer.

14.   The method of claim 13, further comprising adapting the communication software

to provide the call center agent with details about the first contacted party during

playback of the prerecorded greeting.

15. The method of claim 14, wherein the details are selected from the group consisting of city of residence, state of residence, local time, and information about previous attempts to reach the first contacted party.

16. The method of claim 13, further comprising adapting the communication software to simultaneously play the prerecorded greeting to the call center agent to allow the call center agent to make a seamless transition to speaking with the first contacted party.

17. The method of claim 11, wherein the contact source comprises a common database for all of the personal computers in the call center, and wherein the database includes a field to indicate whether a particular telephone number has been previously retrieved by a different personal computer to prevent duplicate retrievals.

18. The method of claim 17, further comprising providing a scrubber to scrub the contact database for telephone numbers on a do-not-call list, duplicate telephone numbers, and telephone numbers with invalid area codes.

19. The method of claim 11, wherein the contact source comprises an affiliated website, the method further comprising coupling each auto-dialer to receive a real-time request from the affiliated website comprising the first contacted party's telephone number.

20.   A method for distributing a dialing function of a call center among a plurality of networked personal computers connected to a public switched telephone network (PSTN) through a gateway, the method comprising:

within each personal computer:

retrieving a different set of telephone numbers from a contact source;

simultaneously calling at least a subset of the telephone numbers using the gateway;

in response to the gateway indicating that the first contacted party has answered a call to a first telephone number:

establishing a voice connection with a first contacted party; and

in response to receiving an indication from the gateway that a second contacted party has answered a call to a second telephone while the voice connection with the first contacted party is still active:

automatically routing the call to the second contacted party to a selected one of the networked personal computers that does not currently have an active voice connection.

21.   A distributed dialing system comprising a plurality of networked personal computers connected to a public switched telephone network (PSTN) through a gateway, each personal computer comprising:

an auto-dialing module to retrieve a different set of telephone numbers from a

contact source and simultaneously dial at least a subset of the retrieved

telephone numbers using the gateway;

a communication module to establish a voice connection with a first contacted

party in response to the gateway indicating that the first contacted party

has answered; and

a routing module to select one of the networked personal computers that does

not currently have an active voice connection in response to receiving an

indication from the gateway that a second contacted party has answered

while the voice connection with the first contacted party is still active, and

to signal the selected personal computer to establish a voice connection

with the second contacted party.

22.   The system of claim 21, wherein the auto-dialing module is to suspend the

dialing of additional telephone numbers within the personal computer while the voice

connection with the first contacted party remains active.

23.   The system of claim 21, wherein the communication module, in response to

establishing a voice connection, is to notify a call center agent using the personal

computer that the call has been answered by the first contacted party and immediately

play to the first contacted party a greeting previously recorded by the call center agent

to compensate for any delay by the call center agent in responding to the first contacted

party's answer.

24. The system of claim 23, wherein the communication module is to provide the call center agent with details about the first contacted party during playback of the prerecorded greeting.

25. The system of claim 24, wherein the details are selected from the group consisting of city of residence, state of residence, local time, and information about previous attempts to reach the first contacted party.

26. The system of claim 23, wherein the communication module is to simultaneously play the prerecorded greeting to the call center agent to allow the call center agent to make a seamless transition to speaking with the first contacted party.

27. The system of claim 21, wherein the contact source comprises a common database for all of the personal computers in the call center, and wherein the database includes a field to indicate whether a particular telephone number has been previously retrieved by a different personal computer to prevent duplicate retrievals.

28. The system of claim 27, further comprising a scrubbing module to scrub the contact database for telephone numbers on a do-not-call list, duplicate telephone numbers, and telephone numbers with invalid area codes.

29.   The system of claim 21, wherein the contact source comprises an affiliated website, and wherein the auto-dialing module is to receive a real-time request from the affiliated website comprising the first contacted party's telephone number.

30.   The system of claim 21, further comprising a monitoring module to monitor a voice connection status of each networked personal computer in the call center.

31.   A computer program product for performing a method for distributing a dialing function of a call center among a plurality of networked personal computers connected to a public switched telephone network (PSTN) through a gateway, the computer program product comprising:

program code within each personal computer to:

retrieve a different set of telephone numbers from a contact source;

simultaneously dial at least a subset of the telephone numbers using the gateway;

establish a voice connection with a first contacted party in response to the gateway indicating that the first contacted party has answered;

receive an indication from the gateway that a second contacted party has answered while the voice connection with the first contacted party is still active;

automatically select one of the networked personal computers that does not currently have an active voice connection; and

signal the selected personal computer to establish a voice connection with the second contacted party.

32.   The computer program product of claim 31, further comprising program code for suspending the dialing of additional telephone numbers for a personal computer with an active voice connection.

33.   The computer program product of claim 31, further comprising:

program code for notifying a call center agent using the personal computer that

the call has been answered by the first contacted party; and

program code for immediately playing to the first contacted party a greeting

previously recorded by the call center agent to compensate for any delay

by the call center agent in responding to the first contacted party's answer.

34.   The computer program product of claim 33, further comprising program code for providing the call center agent with details about the first contacted party during playback of the prerecorded greeting.

35.   The computer program product of claim 34, wherein the details are selected from the group consisting of city of residence, state of residence, local time, and information about previous attempts to reach the first contacted party.

36. The computer program product of claim 33, further comprising program code for simultaneously playing the prerecorded greeting to the call center agent to allow the call center agent to make a seamless transition to speaking with the first contacted party.

37. The computer program product of claim 31, wherein the contact source comprises a common database for all of the personal computers in the call center, and wherein the database includes a field to indicate whether a particular telephone number has been previously retrieved by a different personal computer to prevent duplicate retrievals.

38. The computer program product of claim 37, further comprising program code for scrubbing the contact database for telephone numbers on a do-not-call list, duplicate telephone numbers, and telephone numbers with invalid area codes.

39. The computer program product of claim 31, further comprising program code for receiving a real-time request from an affiliated website comprising the first contacted party's telephone number.

40. The computer program product of claim 31, further comprising program code for monitoring a voice connection status of each networked personal computer in the call center.

41. A virtual call center comprising:

a plurality of remotely-located personal computers connected to a public

switched telephone network (PSTN) through a gateway, each personal

computer comprising:

a network interface for communicating with the other personal computers

through a wide area network;

an auto-dialer to retrieve a different set of telephone numbers from a

database and simultaneously dial at least a subset of the retrieved

telephone numbers using the gateway;

a communication module to establish a voice connection with a first

contacted party in response to the gateway indicating that the first

contacted party has answered; and

a routing module to automatically transfer a call to a second party

answered while the voice connection with the first contacted party

is still active to one of the other personal computers of the virtual

call center that does not currently have an active voice connection.

42. A distributed dialing apparatus comprising:

dialing means for retrieving a different set of telephone numbers from a contact

source and simultaneously dial at least a subset of the retrieved telephone

numbers using a gateway;

communication means for establishing a voice connection with a first contacted

party in response to the gateway indicating that the first contacted party

has answered; and

transfer means for passing a call answered by a second contacted party, while

the voice connection with the first contacted party is still active, to a

selected one of the networked personal computers that does not currently

have an active voice connection.